

Everything I owned dripped with polluted rainwater. I had been standing at a bus stop for forty-five minutes in torrential downpour. *How does a city who plays host to this much rain not budget for public transit shelters?* "Hey! Fuck you buddy!" growled the burnt out punker next to me. The scrap of leather wrapped around him looked like a high school purchase gone further wrong over the last twelve years. His sausage casing of a jacket must have finally gotten to his brain.

"No fuck you!" spit a gangly hipster. My eyes widened in amazement. I couldn't grasp how a twiggy guy had the gall to say anything even moderately threatening to the punk. He was three, maybe four, times the twirps size.

"Fucking preppy ass motherfucker thinks he can just puddle stomp right in front of me without any consequences?" The punk asked me like we were gutter buddies. The hipster ripped off his own watch and drop-kicked it into the empty street. I remained mute.

If rain hadn't waterlogged my face, maybe the Lars Fredericksen wannabe next to me would have seen I was crying. If my tears were visible, he might have concluded I wasn't the right person to recruit to the rage train. "Time isn't on your side huh little prick?" he said to the hipster and then the watch kicking kid hauled off and walloped the big guy on the head. About this time the bus arrived and I entered without wiping my tears. The rain served as a mask. The perpetrator followed me and the victim followed suit. He rubbed the lump growing beside his mohawk.

Leather offered to tweed a hit of a joint, tweed took a hit and passed to me. We sat in hard seats furnished with fabric resembling something The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air would wear. I asked myself, *how do I fit into this arrangement?* "Put out that joint you little shits." the bus driver glared at us in his massive rear-view mirror, "This instant, I'm not fucking around! Now!"

A couple hours later at the hipster's house he whispered in my ear, "Make it warmer," as he slid his hands up and down the front of my soapy body, "I like to feel the heat deep inside". I turned the cool down and the hot up. I turned to face him. As the faucet rained over my scalp he smoothed my hair back slowly and kissed my neck. There were so many new sensations. I didn't know I was capable of burning. I wasn't one for warmth at the time.

His hands found the base of my spine and he cupped my ass in his palms. My brain said *I'm tired and I want to go home*, but for the first time in 10 years I wanted to feel something inside of me. I didn't want to be loved, but boy did I want to be fucked. I rode that ride a few times and when I was through, I asked what was for dinner. He cooked sticky-rice. I caved.

Josh can make all the little puns he wants, but if someone else drops one at the wrong time, he'll wallop them. He never hits me with his fists but his words land hard. The night I met him at the bus-stop I had already become a shadow. I watched but I did not speak. My spectral personality lent itself to our relationship. I walked around our house like a demonic hand stitched doll; my button eyes aglow and my mouth sutured shut. I thought he liked me this way. I really

did. Ever since he stripped my rain drenched clothes off and lent me his, since he made me sticky rice. I assumed he wanted me silent. But then came the day I made a candle for Sara's wedding.

"Where does the wick stop?" he asked, as I heated a cube of pink wax in a pot on the stove.

"What do you mean?"

"Like where does it end?"

"Almost at the bottom of the candle. Where else would it stop?"

"Well don't some people burn the candle at both ends?" playfulness danced in his eyes. It was quips, quotes, and puns all the time with him. He lacked substance? I needed sustenance.

The wax pooled, I stayed quiet. Silence melted the stress from my body like the heat melted form from the wax. With a metal spatula I gently glided what solid was left around the bottom of the pan. "You'll scrape the pan with that, you know?" I wanted to spatula slap him, but I didn't. I remained silent. "I can get you a silicone one, they can withstand extreme temps without altering their own temperature, they don't leave marks on the bottom of the pan." I pretended I couldn't hear him. I wanted to scream *Josh, shut up! Just shut up! Shut the fuck up!* But I didn't. I withstood my internal flames without lashing out.

"Who the fuck is this guy anyway?" Josh asked about Sara's soon to be husband.

"What?" I said utterly shocked by the anger in his voice.

"This guy Sara is dating? What's he about?"

"They're getting married."

"Well duh I knew that."

"Oh, well you said dating, I thought you thought he was someone new. You've met Henry a hundred times, he came to our housewarming."

"Oh and he truly warmed up the house with his face aglow. Nothing like a red-faced alcoholic to cozy up a cold night."

Again with the wordplay. I broke another chunk of wax off and took a deep pranic breath as I released it into the pot. I imagined all of my childhood trauma encased in that waxen cube. I witnessed the solid as it slowly transformed into something new. The wax wasn't fragrant before it melted. Now I was in a field of flowers. I had chosen lilac for this candle on a whim. I had no idea if Henry and Sara would like it.

I didn't know people very well at the time. I wasn't very close to them because I couldn't tell; I couldn't tell them about me. I knew very little about myself. I lost myself somewhere between age twelve and the day I accepted Josh's proposal of monogamy. When I met Josh I was already dying, so I figured letting myself slip entirely into internal rigor mortis would be fine. That, and he was a good fuck. Did he dress like a craft-beer drinking, novel reading, bitch-boy? Yes. However, he also harbored the capacity to wallop a fat fuck punker. Still to this day I find that entirely sexy.

I was in the kitchen enveloped in the land of the candle when Josh shouted at me, "Hello! Anybody home in there?", he scrolled through his phone internet shopping for a rubber spatula. I was so melted with the wax, I was so scented like lilac, I transformed into a pool of scented liquid. I didn't hear him. I didn't hear anything. Inside I vibrated like when you're sitting in a room full of people chanting oms and you stop chanting and absorb the energetic ripples. I didn't want a rubber spatula. I wanted to be abrasive. I wanted to burn. I passed out.

I woke up to the smell of lilac. A candle burned. I was on the sofa and Josh fiddled on his acoustic. I had on clothes I hadn't worn in decades, the kind of shit you keep in the back of the closet because you can't let go of who you used to be. "So how about that prick on the bus huh? Oh man you're still so wet," Josh laughed as he said this, "Here let me lend you some clothes." Josh left the room and I woke from the memory.

The kitchen tile was cold and sticky below me, Josh was shouting, "Amber! Amber! What's wrong?! Are you okay? Talk to me honey! Say something!" I remembered where I was, I screamed, "I don't want a fucking rubber spatula Josh! I hate this shirt you bought me. The frills are ridiculous. I'm sick of that awful mauve sofa you had to have and I haven't had an orgasm in six months!"

"Okay, okay, no spatula. Fine. Here take off the shirt, you can have mine." He cradled me in his arms on the kitchen floor, he pulled my shirt up over my head, slipped his own off, and slid it onto me. Just like that, like it was nothing.

"But what will you wear?" I said as I blinked tears out of my eyes.

"Don't worry about me. Let's focus on you." *What? Me? Who the hell is that?* There was a searing in my heart and throat. A wildfire blazed inside. "Focus on me?" *How do I do that?*

"We never focus on me, you don't care how I feel, It's not about what I want, it's all about you! You always have all the answers. You're the important one. You never ask what I want."

I had forgotten about two years before. It was a Saturday, Josh had to work, I had horrible menstrual pain and I wanted him to stay and comfort me. I built a hibernation cave within the context of our bed while he was away. I listened to binaural beats for menstrual cramp relief on

my cell-phone and lay in fetal position. Blankets tented me in layers. My cramps were sonic pain waves, my ovaries vibrated into oblivion.

"Amber, baby? I'm home. Honey? Where are you? There you are little bear. I got you some corn pops and rice milk, your favorite. And look I found the Weezer concert video you've been wanting. We can watch it together." I pulled the cereal box and milk carton through a hole in the blankets but did not make a sound or budge.

A stuffed animal my niece had bought me on valentines entered my cave. Puppetized and voiced by Josh, the bear told me "You can swish the milk and cereal around in my mouth all you want but it won't be the same outside of a bowl." I slowly pressed the face of the stuffy out of my den with the pad of my foot. Josh managed to grab the foot and rubbed right where my feet always hurt. I never told him it hurt there, his hands organically found the place, because he knew.

I let him rub both my feet until completion and then I slowly peeled the covers away from my head. I peered over the top and saw he had on the soft hoodie, the one I liked to rub between my fingers when we watched movies. How did he intuit what I needed? He loved me.

In the kitchen, on the floor, both of us stayed silent for several minutes after my outburst. Josh shuttered a bit. He had no shirt and cold air blew in through the cracked window. "I always ask what you want Amber, but you never say. I have to guess. It's like you're trying to hide from me." *I'm hiding from everyone*, tears streamed down my face. I didn't want to let him in. Fear of being seen lived in me like a virus. I was scared of everything, most of all my Self. I didn't want to find myself at another rainy bus-stop with a face full of tears because no-one understood me.

"But I do know who you are Amber," Josh said as he wiped a tear with his thumb. " You're the person I'd give my shirt to even if it's cold. I don't give a fuck about anyone else. Fuck Sara, keep her candle, you love lilac. Remember the candle you burnt the night we met? You had it with you in your backpack. What happened to that girl? The one who taught me to weave hemp bracelets. The chick who demanded we spit in our palms and shake on it when we made promises. Why don't you wear your band tees anymore? What kind of music do you even listen to? I always have to pick the music on long drives. I always have to pick the place we go to eat. I miss you. I want you to talk to me. Say something! Say anything."

"I'm scared."

"Of what?"

"Of you."

"What?! Why?"

"Because you love me."

"What? You're not making any sense. Did you eat an edible when I went to the market? Did Erik leave another brownie here?"

"No Josh I'm serious. I'm sober. When we met at the bus stop.. you have no idea what I had been through..."

"Oh yes I do, you forget I was out there in the rain too."

"Did you really look at my face? I..."

"Of course. I saw you were crying. I pay attention. You needed that joint just as much as I did. That guy was a prick, but at least he had the courtesy to pass. But that's not the point. I love you

baby. I see you. I knew you were going through some shit when we met. but it didn't matter then and it doesn't matter now."

"But it does, it does matter, because I died a few weeks before it rained and I've let myself die more and more every day since."

"Amber, don't be morose. You are not dead, I can feel your warmth against my chest, which by the way is nice given I'm half naked!" I laughed, and a tear that had been streaming dropped to the ground. Josh always has something playful to say. I hate that about him but it does balance out my mood when I'm spiraling. "Let's get you off the floor baby."

He scooped me up without causing any scratches. His cold chest pressed up against my cheek and everything inside of me calmed. *Maybe I do want a rubber spatula. Maybe I'm just not used to the gentle approach.* "Are you alright bear?" Josh asked me as I shook a little in his arms.

"No I'm not, but I will be."

"Okay mama I'm here, I'm not going anywhere."

At Sara's wedding reception I placed the wrapped candle on the gift table. I got the courtesy nod from the family member who guarded the table from the classic loser who would steal the card box. Josh signaled me to our table. I waved to Sara as she went to sit with the bridal party. "The groom is already three sheets to the wind and they haven't had their first dance yet." Josh whispered out of the side of his mouth.

"Nobody's perfect."

"Well we sure as hell aren't." he said as he pinched my ass on the sly.



The punker from the train station tapped his glass and began an eloquent speech in honor of the Bride and Groom. Josh and I exchanged a shocked glance and struggled desperately to hide our laughter. On the way home from the wedding we listened to a CD I chose and grabbed ice-cream at my favorite place. "I told you Henry was a loser, all chummy and shit with that fucking punker." Josh said with a sneer.

"Sara stripped her way through college and was the front-women for a Bikini Kill cover band. I think she's fine."

"You have the weirdest friends."

"And that's why you love me."